

All My Money: Change For the Better – A Research-Based Approach to Updating A Curriculum for Individuals Working With Limited-Resource Audiences

Pam R. Atkinson

Karen M. Chan

Sasha L. Grabenstetter

Kathryn L. Sweedler

University of Illinois Extension

Abstract

More than ever, today's Extension programs are asked to do more with less. Educators providing services in multiple subject areas or expanded geographic areas need tools they can easily use to facilitate financial education programs. In addition, using a train-the-trainer format allows Extension educators to greatly expand their reach, their impact, and their center of influence. Training staff of other agencies and organizations positions Extension as the recognized authority in this field – the provider of research-based curriculum in the area of financial management.

To meet this need, University of Illinois Extension followed a carefully designed, research-based approach to develop the new, re-titled version of its curriculum, *All My Money: Change for the Better*. The process included a needs assessment survey and review of the financial education core competencies identified by the Financial Literacy and Education Commission, as well as field-testing and peer review of each lesson.

Key words: financial education, financial literacy, financial capability, train-the-trainer, limited-resource audience, low-income audience

Introduction

Financial education for vulnerable populations such as limited resource audiences is one of many priorities for Extension services (USDA 2016), and is a recognized need nationally (US Department of Treasury 2013). In this age of government belt-tightening and Extension staff reductions in many states, Extension programs look for ways to maximize their reach and impact (Fischer 2009; Morse 2011). Educators who provide services in multiple subject areas or expanded geographic areas need tools they can easily use to facilitate financial education programs, especially if that is not their area of expertise. For those who do have expertise in

personal finance, having well-designed, flexible lessons that are ready to use frees them from the time needed to develop their own curriculum.

Using a train-the-trainer format allows Extension educators to greatly expand their reach, their impact, and their center of influence. Training staff of other agencies and organizations positions Extension as the recognized authority in this field – the provider of research-based curriculum in the area of financial management. Trained front-line social service and community organization staff are in a unique position to integrate financial education along with other services (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau 2014, Anderson et al 2007). In addition, research evaluating the impact of similar train-the-trainer programs has found an improvement in the trained staffs' financial management practices, as well as the targeted clientele (Chan et al 1999, Lyons 2006).

To meet this need of financial education for limited resource audiences, University of Illinois Extension followed a carefully designed, research-based approach to develop the new, re-titled version of its curriculum, All My Money: Change for the Better.

Program Overview

All My Money: Change for the Better (AMM) is a train-the-trainer financial management curriculum developed specifically for persons working with limited-resource audiences. The curriculum has eight financial management lessons:

- Who Am I with Money
- Tracking Spending
- Savings
- Spending Plans
- Money Services
- Choosing Credit
- What Happens If I Don't Pay
- Credit History and Score.

The curriculum also includes a guide to being a better facilitator as well as pre- and post-assessments, to which organizations can add their own questions to meet their particular evaluation needs.

This is a new edition of a curriculum that has been in use since 1997. Nearly 75 percent of the material is new. However, it follows the same adult education principles as previous versions and has the same philosophy and target audience.

It uses a hands-on, experiential approach that encourages participants to learn from the activities and from each other. Very little of the instruction requires the facilitator to lecture. Instead, participants learn through discussion, games, case examples, demonstrations, and by applying the information to their everyday lives. Instructions for the facilitator include answer keys, discussion guides, and alternate ways of teaching activities for particular audiences or situations. The material is intentionally non-judgmental, and instructions point out areas to facilitators where it is especially important to avoid voicing personal biases.

Each lesson is designed to be approximately an hour long. To enhance its flexibility, the curriculum also suggests a thirty-minute version of each lesson. Most lessons can stand alone or be taught as part of a series.

Purpose

AMM meets the unique financial education needs of low-income audiences and the organizations who serve them – including Extension staff.

It allows facilitators to present topics that are relevant to this audience using an engaging, non-judgmental, hands-on approach.

Many social service agencies, community-based organizations, churches, and government entities want and need to help their clientele with financial management issues, but their staff lack the knowledge or appropriate tools to do so. AMM is designed so that their staff and volunteers can teach financial literacy topics, even if they do not personally have expertise in personal finance.

Curriculum Development

To achieve these goals, the curriculum was developed using a carefully designed, research-based approach including a needs assessment survey and review of the financial education core competencies identified by the Financial Literacy and Education Commission (US Department of the Treasury 2010), as well as field testing and peer review of each lesson.

Needs Assessment Survey

A needs assessment survey and protocol was developed and received approval from the UIUC Institutional Review Board. An email invitation to participate was sent to individuals who had purchased or been trained in an earlier version of the curriculum, or had expressed an interest in it. Emails were sent to 506 addresses, of which 41 bounced. Assuming that the remaining 465 addresses were valid, the response rate was 19%.

Respondents included staff of social service agencies, community groups, Cooperative Extension programs, and others. The survey's goal was to learn:

- how low-income people manage their finances today,
- how agencies serve and communicate with their low-income clients, and
- what those agencies look for in a financial management curriculum and training for staff.

The survey used screening questions so that information was collected only from those respondents who verified that they served limited resource audiences. Seventy-two useable responses were received.

Survey results helped to determine the content of the curriculum including:

- While most clients read English, 30 percent of agency staff reported that about half or more of their clients have limited reading skills. Participant handouts are designed for easy reading, both in terms of the text (vocabulary, sentence length, and amount of text) and layout.
- 52 percent of surveyed staff reported that half or more of clients have seen a drop in income in the last 5 years. Budgeting and debt management are key components of dealing with a reduced income, and the curriculum focuses on these areas.
- New or alternative financial services often used by clients include prepaid debit cards, check cashing services, title loans, payday loans, and electronic banking. The curriculum covers a variety of money services, including check cashing and reloadable prepaid debit cards.
- Writing checks is a relatively uncommon activity among this audience; only 24 percent of respondents said that the majority of their clients wrote checks. The curriculum covers a variety of money services, including checking accounts. However, it does not teach how to write a check.
- Debt problems and the need to better manage debt was a recurring theme in both open- and closed-ended questions. Lessons on Credit Management and What Happens If I Don't Pay were added.

How agencies work with clientele, and what they want to see in a financial management curriculum guided the format and design of the curriculum:

- Methods used most frequently to share information with clientele are traditional ones: phone calls, group meetings, and individual meetings or counseling sessions. The curriculum provides traditional handouts and worksheets for use in-person.
- Curriculum features most likely to be considered “very valuable” are instructor materials in electronic files (95 percent), lesson plans or outlines for the instructor (93 percent), instructor materials in hard copy (83 percent), evaluation tools (83 percent), hands-on activities (75 percent), and background information for the instructor (70 percent). Instructor materials including additional background for the instructor and detailed lessons plans will be provided in electronic form on a flash drive. Activities are hands-on and experiential rather than lecture. Evaluations for each lesson are provided, and users are referred to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau’s Financial Well-Being Scale (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau 2015) as a pre and post test.

Field test and peer review

Each of the eight lessons was taught to limited resource individuals by at least one community agency. Lessons were also field tested by the authors. In addition, peer reviewers for each lesson were solicited from recognized personal finance education experts. At least two reviewers provided feedback on each lesson.

As a result of field test and review feedback:

- Several activities were streamlined or simplified;
- Unclear examples or wording were changed
- The amount of reading required by participants was reduced, and reading level was improved; and
- A thirty-minute version of each lesson was created.

Impact

The curriculum will be released in 2016. The Financial Well-Being Scale and scoring worksheet, developed by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB 2015) is included with the curriculum so that facilitators can use a validated measure to obtain pre- and post- class results.

The reach and impact of previous versions of the curriculum were well-documented:

- Over 3,000 copies of the original curriculum were sold nationwide.
- Impact data collected from 172 agency staff trained in the curriculum, and from 59 individual clientele, show that AMM helps to develop positive money management behaviors. Both agency staff and their clientele reported that they would be much less likely to run out of money or to pay bills late after the training, while they were much more likely to compare prices, complain when they had a consumer problem, and communicate with family members about money (Chan et al 1999).
- In a follow-up survey of agency staff trained to use the program, 15 people reported using the AMM curriculum and had taught lessons to 857 people, either working with them individually or in groups (Chan 2004).
- Extension Educators trained staff of agencies at 16 sites, using AMM and a companion curriculum titled *Your Money & Your Life*, where over 1000 low-income individuals participated in a series of financial education workshops. Pre and post-tests showed an average increase in knowledge of nearly 20 percentage points. In follow-up surveys conducted, on average, 10 months after participants completed the training, more than 80 percent said they did a better job keeping track of their expenses and that they had changed their budgeting practices in important ways. More than one third of those without bank accounts had opened a checking account, and one third had opened a savings account. Forty percent said they used payday loans less (Anderson, Scott, and Zhan 2004).

The authors expect to see similar impacts from the new edition.

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